

BRITAIN'S STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

The Labor Government After Three Years

GEORGE ORWELL

IT IS characteristic of our age that at the time of the 1945 General Election one could see fairly clearly what problems the Labor government was facing, and that it is just as difficult today as it was then to predict either success or failure. This is the age of the unresolved dilemma, of the struggle which never slows down and never leads to a decision. It is as though the world were suffering from a disease which is simultaneously acute, chronic, and not fatal.

In Britain we have lived for three years in a state of almost continuous crisis, like one of those radio serials in which the hero falls over a precipice at the end of each instalment. The supreme calamity is, of course, always averted, but the end of the story never seems to be any nearer. Bankruptcy has been put off and put off by American loans, by "austerity," and by the spending of reserves, and when those ex-

For many of the democratic peoples throughout the world, Great Britain's socialist experiment represents a crucial hope for the development of a workable alternative to both capitalism and Communism; and from any point of view, the success or failure of Britain's Labor government must be recognized as immensely important to the final outcome of the present struggle between East and West. GEORGE ORWELL, one of the most acute political observers in England, here examines the record of the Labor government in terms of the fundamental question: is socialism compatible with democracy? Mr. Orwell, at once an intellectual and a man of action, fought in the POUM militia during the Spanish Civil War, served with the British Home Guard during the recent conflict, and has been literary editor of the *London Tribune*. He is the author of a number of books, of which the latest is *Animal Farm*, a satire on Communism. He was born in Bengal, India, in 1903.

pedients cease to work it may be put off still further, possibly for decades, by a successful drive for exports: but the fundamental problem of making Britain genuinely solvent without sinking the standard of living to an unbearably low level remains untouched.

It is, I think, important to realize that in Britain the struggle between collectivism and laissez-faire is secondary. The main objective is national survival. Looking on from the outside and reading the British press, one might easily get the idea that the country is groaning beneath bureaucratic misrule and would be only too glad to return to the good old days of free enterprise; but this merely appears to be so because the big capitalists and the middling entrepreneur class are disproportionately vocal.

Britain is in many ways a conservative country, but it is also a country without a peasantry, one in which the desire for economic liberty is not strong or widespread. Property, in Britain, means a house, furniture, and a few hundred pounds' worth of savings; freedom means freedom of thought and speech, or the power to do what you choose in your spare time. The great majority of people take it for granted that they will live on wages or salaries rather than profits, welcome the idea of birth-to-death social insurance, and do not feel strongly one way or the other about the nationalization of industry. Rationing and controls generally are, of course, in a sense unpopular, but this is only important in that it increases the exhaustion and boredom resulting from eight years of overwork.

We are handicapped, in fact, not by any positive desire to return to capitalism

but by the habits of mind acquired during prosperity (including the ideology of the socialist movement itself).

EVEN today, and even in left-wing circles, it is not fully grasped that Britain's economic position is an inherently bad one. A small overpopulated country, importing its food and paying for it with exports, can only keep going so long as the rest of the world is not industrialized. If the present world-wide development of industry continues, there will in the long run be no reason for international trade, except in raw materials, a few tropical products, and possibly a few luxury goods. All the advantage will lie—does already lie—with large autarchic countries like Russia or the United States. Britain, therefore, can only survive as an "advanced" and populous country if it is integrated into a much larger area.

At present, this may happen in one of four ways. One is by the formation of a union of Western Europe plus Africa; another is by tightening the links of the Commonwealth and transferring perhaps half the population of Britain to the English-speaking dominions; a third is by allowing Britain, with the rest of Europe, to become part of the Russian system; and the final possibility is by the accession of Britain to the United States. The objection in every case is obvious.

The first alternative, the most canvassed at present and perhaps the most hopeful, faces enormous difficulties and dangers, of which Russian hostility is only the most immediate. The second, even supposing the dominions to be prepared for it, could probably not be carried out except by a despotic government which was accustomed to transporting human beings like shiploads of cattle. The third, though it may happen as a result of defeat in war, can be ruled out as a possibility, since no one except a handful of Communists desires it. The fourth is quite likely to happen, but it is unacceptable from a British point of view, since it would mean becoming very definitely a junior partner and being tied to a country

which everyone except a few Tories regards as politically backward.

Even if any of these possibilities, or some combination of them, comes to pass, it will only do so after a long delay, whereas the need for solvency is immediate. The leaders of the Labor government, therefore, can only make their plans on the assumption that Britain has got to be self-sufficient in the near future. They are endeavoring to bring a European union into being, they hope and believe that when it exists the dominions will adhere to it, and they are determined—indeed, they are obliged—to remain on goods terms with the United States; but their immediate aim must be to make Britain's exports balance her imports. And they have to do this with worn-out industrial equipment, with foreign preoccupations which demand large armed forces and are therefore a heavy drain on man-power, and with a working class which is tired and not too well fed, and which fought the war and voted at the General Election in the expectation of something quite different.

IN 1945, approximately half the electorate voted Labor. I believe it would be an exaggeration to say that the majority of these people voted for Socialism. They voted for full employment, bigger old-age pensions, the raising of the school-leaving age, more social and economic equality, and more democracy all round; and for nationalization of industry as a way of bringing these things about. The government, even if it wants to, cannot afford to disappoint its supporters altogether, and therefore has to combine basic reconstruction with immediate reforms that make the reconstruction more difficult. It would have been almost impossible, for instance, for a Labor government not to give re-housing first priority; but, necessary though the houses are, this means reducing the labor and materials that can be allotted to industrial building. The change-over to national ownership is not in itself an inspiring process, and in the popular regard the Labor party is the party that stands for shorter working hours, a free health service,

day nurseries, free milk for school children, and the like, rather than the party that stands for Socialism.

Unfortunately, given the desperate shortage of nearly everything, it is not easy to improve the lives of the people in any material way. Physically, the average British citizen is probably somewhat worse off than he was three years ago. The housing situation is extremely bad; food, though not actually insufficient, is unbearably dull. The prices of cigarettes, beer, and unrationed food such as vegetables are fantastic. And clothes rationing is an increasing hardship since its effects are cumulative. We are in the transition period which awaits all left-wing parties when they attain to power, and which always comes as a painful surprise because so little has been said about it beforehand. In general, left-wing parties gain their following by promising better material conditions, but when the test comes it always turns out that those conditions are not attainable immediately, but only after a long, self-denying struggle during which the average man is actually worse off than he was before he started. And precisely because he is worse off he refuses, or is unable, to make the effort demanded of him. One sees a perfect illustration of this in the struggle over the British coal mines.

The coal mines had to be nationalized, because in no other way was it possible to recapitalize them to the extent needed to bring them up to date. At the same time nationalization makes no immediate difference. The basic fact about the British mines is that they are old and neglected, and working conditions in them are so intolerable that without direct coercion, or the threat of unemployment, it is almost impossible to recruit sufficient labor to keep them going. Ever since the war ended we have had about fifty thousand less miners than we need, with the result that we can only with the greatest difficulty produce enough coal for our own needs, while an extra fifteen million tons for export seems an almost impossible objective. Of course the mines can be and probably will be modern-

ized, but the process will take several years, and in the meantime, in order to make or buy the necessary machinery, our need of coal will be all the greater.

The same situation reproduces itself in less acute forms throughout the whole of industry. Nor is it easy, when people are tired already, to get them to work harder by direct economic inducements. If wages are evened out, labor drifts away from the more disagreeable jobs: if especially high rates are paid for those jobs, absenteeism increases, because it is then possible to earn enough to live on by working only three or four shifts a week. Not only individual absenteeism, but the innumerable stoppages and unofficial strikes of the past few years have probably been due to sheer exhaustion quite as much as to any economic grievance. It is true that the amount of time lost by industrial disputes has been small compared with what it was in the years immediately following the 1914-18 war, but there is the important difference that the strikes of that period, when successful, brought concrete benefits to the working class. Today, when the main problem is how to produce a bare sufficiency of goods, a strike is in effect a blow against the community as a whole, including the strikers themselves, and its net effect is inflationary.

UNDERNEATH our present difficulties there lie two facts which the Socialist movement has always tended to ignore. One is that certain jobs which are vitally necessary are never done except under some kind of compulsion. As soon as you have full employment, therefore, you have to make use of forced labor for the dirtier kinds of work. (You can call it by some more soothing name, of course.) The other fact I have already alluded to: the radical impoverishment of Britain—the impossibility, at this stage, of raising the working-class standard of living, or even, probably, of maintaining it at its present level.

I do not profess to know whether our immediate economic problem will be solved. Putting aside the danger of war with the

Soviet Union, it depends in the short run on the success of the Marshall Plan, and in the somewhat longer run on the formation of a Western Union or on the ability of Britain to keep ahead in the scramble for markets. But what is certain is that we can never return to the favored position that we held in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Until they found themselves in power and therefore up against hard facts, British Socialists would not readily admit that our national income, which they wanted to divide more equitably, was in part the product of colonial exploitation. Over a long period we not only produced less than we consumed (our exports have not balanced our imports since 1913), but we had the benefit of cheap raw materials and assured markets in countries which we held as colonies or could overawe by military force.

There were many reasons why this state of affairs could not last forever, and one reason was the decay of imperialist sentiment in the British people themselves. One sees here the still unsolved contradiction that dwells at the heart of the Socialist movement. Socialism, a creed which grew up in the industrialized Western countries, means better material conditions for the white proletariat; it also means liberation for the exploited colored peoples. But the two aims, at least temporarily, are incompatible. The leaders of the Socialist movement have never said this, or never said it loudly enough, and they are now paying for their timidity. Because the basic economic situation is not understood, hardships which are in fact unavoidable have the appearance of being due to the persistence of social inequality. The country houses and the smart hotels are still full of rich people, and it is tempting to imagine that if only they were wiped out there would be enough of everything for everybody. The fact that we are poorer than we were, that for a long time we shall go on being poorer, and that no redistribution of income can substantially alter this, is not clearly grasped, and morale suffers accordingly.

IT is a commonplace that the Labor government has failed badly in its publicity. There has been a good deal of exhortation, especially in the last few months, but the day-to-day process of telling the public what is happening, and why, has not been systematically undertaken, nor had the need for it been realized beforehand. It was typical of the government's way of doing things to let people imagine for a year or more that things were going fairly well, and then suddenly to plaster the walls with posters bearing the almost threatening slogan "Work or Want". The housing shortage, the fuel shortage, bread rationing, and Polish immigration have all caused more resentment than they need have done if the underlying facts had been properly explained. Nor has the government been very successful in "selling" Britain abroad, as one can see from the fact that we are execrated all over the world, to a great extent unjustly, for our actions in Palestine, while the enormously more important settlement with India passes almost unnoticed.

So far as publicity inside Britain is concerned, the government has two great difficulties to contend with. One is its lack of vehicles of expression. With the exception of a single daily paper, the *Herald*, all that matters of the British press is controlled either by Tories, or, in a very few cases, by left-wing factions not reliably sympathetic to a Labor government. The BBC on the other hand is a semi-autonomous corporation which is neutral in home politics and can only be used to a limited extent for official announcements. The other difficulty the government suffers from is that almost up to the moment of the general election it was in coalition with its opponents and therefore had no chance to make its own position clear.

Before the war, years of steady propaganda had won over to the Labor party the bulk of the manual workers and part of the middle class: but this was old-fashioned Socialist propaganda, largely irrelevant to a postwar world in which Britain is weakened and impoverished, Germany and Japan

prostrate, Russia in effect an enemy, and the United States an active world power. During the more desperate period of the war the Labor party was not in a position to declare an independent policy, though in my opinion it made a serious mistake in not getting out of the coalition as soon as it became clear that the war was won. Then came the general election, at extremely short notice. The Labor party went to the country, as it was bound to do in the circumstances, promising peace abroad and prosperity at home.

If it had been truthful it would have explained that there were very hard times ahead, all the harder because the first steps towards socialism now had to be taken, and that the ending of the hot war with the Axis merely meant the beginning of a cold war with the Soviet Union. To say, as every Labor candidate did, "A Labor government will get along better with Russia" was about equivalent to saying "A Protestant government will get along better with the Vatican." But the average voter did not grasp the fact, obvious since 1943, that Russia was hostile, nor the fact that Communism and Social Democracy are irreconcilable enemies; and meanwhile the election had to be won. The Labor party won it partly by irredeemable promises. It could hardly be blamed for doing this, but the confusion in the public mind between a Left policy and a pro-Russian policy had ugly possibilities, and it is owing to good luck rather than good management that they have not been realized. If the pro-Russian enthusiasm that grew up during the war had persisted, the spectacle of Britain engaging in a seemingly meaningless quarrel with the USSR, and keeping up large and expensive armed forces in consequence, might have split the Labor movement from top to bottom. For it could then have been plausibly said that our hardships were due to an anti-Communist policy forced upon us by America. This, of course, is what the Communists and crypto-Communists do say, but with less success than they might legitimately have

expected, because of the cooling-off of Russo-phile feeling. This cooling-off has not been due to Labor party propaganda but to the behavior of the Russian government itself. Of course there is always the possibility of a sudden revulsion in popular feeling if, for example, we appeared to be on the verge of war for some frivolous reason.

WITH all the difficulties that I have enumerated—the threatening and perhaps desperate economic situation, the tug-of-war between pre-election promises and essential reconstruction, the exhaustion and disappointment which express themselves in absenteeism and unjustified strikes, the resentment of small business men and middle-class people generally who are more and more fed up with controls and heavy taxation—in spite of all this, the government is still in a very strong position. The next general election is two years away, and before then something calamitous may happen, but given anything like a continuance of present conditions, I do not believe that the Labor party can be turned out of office. At present, although it has enemies, it has no ideological rival. There is only the Conservative party, which is bankrupt of ideas and can only squeal about grievances which are essentially middle-class or upper-class, and the opposition on the Left, the Communists and "cryptos" and the disgruntled Labor supporters who might follow them. These people have failed to bring about the split they were trying for, because they have identified themselves with a threatening foreign power, while in home affairs they have no program radically different from that of the Labor party itself.

One must remember that between them the Labor party and the Conservative party adequately represent the bulk of the population, and unless they disintegrate it is difficult for any other mass party to arise. The Communists are able to exert considerable influence by using "infiltration" methods, but in any open contest their position is hopeless, and that of the Fascist groups is even more so. Mosley is again active, and

anti-Semitism has increased over the past year or two, but the growth of a serious Fascist movement is not to be feared at present, because without the break-up of the old parties the potential membership for it does not exist. Electorally, it is only the Conservatives that the Labor party has to fear, and there is no sign that they are making much headway. It is true that they made large gains in the local-government elections, probably because people who do not as a rule bother to vote, especially women, wanted to register their exasperation with unpopular controls such as potato rationing. But in parliamentary by-elections the Labor party has not lost a single seat that it won in 1945; this is quite unprecedented for a party that has been in power for three years. The Conservatives could only win the next general election by swinging over both the "floating vote" (middle class and white-collar workers), and, in addition, the two million votes which were cast for the Liberals in 1945. The mass of the manual workers are not likely ever again to vote for the Conservative party, which is identified in their minds with class privilege and, above all, with unemployment.

IF THE Conservatives returned to power it would be a disaster, because they would have to follow much the same policy as a Labor government, but without possessing the confidence of the people who matter most. With Labor securely in power, perhaps for several successive terms, we have at least the chance of effecting the necessary changes peacefully. No doubt Britain will survive, at some level or another, in the sense that there will not actually be mass starvation; the question is whether we can survive as a democratic country with a certain decency of social atmosphere and political behavior. For a long time to come, unless there is breakdown and mass unemployment, the main problem will be to induce people to work harder; can we do it without forced labor, terrorism, and a secret police force? So far, in spite of the cries of agony from the Beaver-

brook press, the government has encroached very little upon individual liberty. It has barely used its powers, and has not indulged in anything that could reasonably be called political persecution. But then the decisive moment has not yet come.

Other countries, notably France, are in a position essentially similar to that of Britain, and perhaps the same problem faces all countries sooner or later. Left-wing governments only come to power in periods of calamity, and their first task is always to get more work out of exhausted and disappointed people. So far as Britain is concerned, all one can say is that the British people are very patient, very disciplined, and will put up with almost anything so long as they see a reason for it. The most urgent need is for the government to enter, more intelligently than it has done hitherto, upon the job of basic explanation, so that the average man, who endured the war in the vague hope that it would lead to something better, may understand *why* he has got to endure overwork and discomfort for years more, with no immediate recompense except an increase in social equality.

As yet, the advent of a Labor government has made no marked difference in the intellectual atmosphere of Britain, and it has affected the position of people in the liberal professions (other than doctors) less than it has affected business men and manual workers. The habitually discontented and mistrustful attitude of the left-wing intelligentsia has hardly been modified at all. The outlook of these people is adequately represented by the *New Statesman*, and perhaps also by *Tribune*, and by such publicists as Laski, Cole, and Crossman. All of them, of course, support the Labor party—some of them, indeed, are organizationally connected with it—but they always regard it with impatience, and they are usually in disagreement with its foreign policy. The fashionable attitude has always been to look on the Labor party as a machine which will not move faster than it is pushed, and to suspect its leaders of wanting, not actually to sell out to the enemy, but to slow down the rate of change

and keep the social structure as nearly intact as possible. It is noticeable that people still habitually talk about "British imperialism" and "the British ruling class" as though nothing had happened, and with the apparent implication that Churchill and Company are still in some way ruling the country. A symptom of the Labor party's low prestige is the fact that there is not a weekly or monthly paper of standing which is a reliable supporter of the government.

To account for this attitude, and its failure to change when Labor came to power, one has to remember several things. One is the sell-out of Macdonald and his group in 1931, which left behind it a sort of traumatic shock and a half-conscious feeling that a Labor government is of its nature weak and potentially treacherous. Another is the fact that the Labor party is essentially a working-class party, the organ of the unionized industrial workers, while the theoreticians of Socialism are mostly middle-class. The Labor party has a policy, but has no clearcut ideology which can compete with Marxism. It exists primarily to win better conditions for the wage-earners, and at the same time it has an ethical, quasi-religious tradition, deriving ultimately from evangelical Protestantism and not acceptable to middle-class intellectuals who have been subjected to Continental influences. The difference of outlook is generally sharpest over things happening outside Britain. In the years before the war it was, with few exceptions, only the middle-class supporters of the Labor party who were interested in the struggle against fascism abroad, and there is a similar division over Palestine now. The workers, in so far as they bother about the matter at all, are not anti-Bevin on the Palestine issue, whereas nearly all left-wing intellectuals are violently so. This is less a difference of policy than of subjective feeling. Few people could tell you what our Palestine policy is or was (assuming that we ever had one), and fewer still could tell you what it ought to be. But the reaction to the plight of the Jewish DP's, to the achievements of the Zionist settlers, and perhaps also to the spectacle of British

soldiers being blown up by terrorists, varies according to class background.

DURING and since the war there has appeared a new generation of intellectuals whose more vocal members are anti-Socialist in outlook—or, at any rate, are opposed to centralism, planning, direction of labor, and compulsory military service, and, in general, to the interference of the state with the individual. This outlook expresses itself in movements variously called anarchism, pacifism, and personalism; there are also the minor nationalist movements (Welsh and Scottish), which have gained ground in recent years and which have the same anti-centralist tendency. Most younger writers seem to have hostility to the government, which they accuse almost in the same breath of being reactionary and *dirigiste*.

There has been considerable outcry about the waning of intellectual liberty and the tendency of writers, artists, and scientists to degenerate into official hacks. This is partly justified, but the blame does not lie with the Labor party. What has happened is that for about a dozen years past the economic status of writers, if not of all artists, has been deteriorating, and they have had to look more and more to the state and to semi-official bodies such as the BBC to give them a livelihood. The war accelerated the process, and the present government has merely carried on a tradition which it inherited from its predecessor. The Labor party does not, as such, have any literary or artistic policy. It is headed by practical men who are not much inclined either to befriend the artist or to "coordinate" him in the totalitarian fashion. The recent tightening-up of employment regulations does contain a potential threat to all intellectuals, because it makes it possible, in theory, to classify any unsuccessful writer or artist as a non-worker and direct him into "gainful employment." However, this does not happen in practice. The right to starve, so important to those who genuinely care about literature or the arts, seems to be almost as well guaranteed as it was under pure capitalism.